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HO CHI MINH'S REPORTED WILLINGNESS TO NEGOTIATE

Viet Minh leader Ho Chi Minh was quoted on 29 November, in the non-Communist Stockholm evening tabloid Expressen, as "prepared to discuss" a proposal from France for a settlement in Indochina. The paper described Ho's statement as made in response to questions it had submitted on 5 November through the Viet Minh embassy in Peiping.

Ho was quoted at one point as stating that "if any neutral nations desire to see the war in Viet Nam come to an end and try to bring about negotiations, they will be welcome," but he gave no indication of whether he referred to mediation by other members of the Orbit, to Swedish mediation, or to a recently reported proposal by Indian prime minister Nehru. Ho reportedly added, however, that "negotiations for an armistice are essentially an affair between the government of France" and his own -- a statement evidently intended to drive a wedge between Paris and Bao Dai's government.

Ho's statement is the most forthright yet made by the Viet Minh on the question of negotiations, previous comments having been no more than vague hints. There is, however, no convincing evidence that the Viet Minh at this time urgently desires the prompt conclusion of a negotiated settlement. It appears most probable that Ho is interested in generating doubt and suspicion in the minds of non-Communist Vietnamese, and in exploiting war-weariness in France. In concert with his Orbit partners, moreover, he is probably seeking to disrupt Atlantic unity. It is likely that Orbit policy will continue in the immediate future to be based on the premise that a war of attrition in Indochina offers greater advantages than either peace or an expanded Communist war effort.

France's receptivity to peace feelers was accurately reflected by the prompt statement made by Marc Jacquet, Secretary of State for the Associated States, to the Swedish newspaper correspondent. Terming Ho's reply "news of world importance" if confirmed, he declared that France would not

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refuse to negotiate, but would require more than this interview "as a point of departure." Official channels like the Swedish embassy in Peiping were, he pointed out, open to Ho. Jacquet stated that Ho's replies were "of great interest, above all when you think of the imminence of the Bermuda conference and the forthcoming four-power meeting." Referring to the allusion to direct negotiations between France and Ho, he maintained that France would negotiate only in close conjunction with the Associated States.

Vietnamese Premier Tam, also commenting from Paris on Ho's remarks, indicated a qualified willingness to treat with the Viet Minh. This position is a definite departure from the Vietnamese government's previous opposition to negotiations, and must therefore be viewed with reserve.

During the past six months French officials have been increasingly outspoken in their search for a negotiated settlement in Indochina. Though Premier Laniel immediately announced that the Jacquet statement could not be taken as authoritative until the cabinet had discussed the subject, he had said on 25 November in the foreign policy debate that France was open to an immediate "cease-fire proposal from the "adversary," and assured the National Assembly that he intended at Bermuda to seek general pacification of Asia through negotiations. He can now be expected to increase his insistence for American acquiescence to five-power talks, but is unlikely to halt military operations until he considers that the Viet Minh has made a firm offer.

Within the National Assembly, however, there is now little organized opposition to the basic concept of a negotiated settlement. Pro-EDC elements would welcome a cessation of hostilities in the hope of overcoming the objections of those maintaining that French commitments in Indochina assure German preponderance in the EDC. Anti-EDC forces will seize on Ho's statement as further evidence that the general relaxation of East-West tension makes German rearmament unnecessary. Even those Frenchmen with immediate economic interests in Indochina will probably welcome the possibility of salvaging something through negotiations.

The French public will recognize as propaganda Ho's reference to American pressure to ratify EDC; but the mere announcement of the "offer" will hurt ratification prospects, since any hint of Soviet willingness to negotiate for the neutralization of Germany meets with a hopeful response in the French assembly.

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